

10: d'Orleans--308
116, 183, 512, 641, 831

T-3 (1891-92) 1894

Laos

"It may be asked how do the Laotians spend their time if they are lazy and have scarcely any occupation? The answer is easy--the greater part of their days and nights being employed in paying court to the young ladies and in services at the pagoda.

Formerly there was a law dispensing the young men from military service and taxation upon the ground that their first duty was towards the young women and although this law is repealed de jure, it still serves as a rule of conduct and reveals the spirit of this people."

10: d'Orleans--321

T-3

(1891-92) 1894

Laos

116, 438, 777, 831, 842

[LSS: in the market of Luang Prabang] "There are amulets, wild boar tusks, pyrites, and fossils rolled up in thin silver thread, some of these latter being supposed to possess the power of fecundation, while others are obscene."

Ever since the death, singers and improvisers of both sexes accompanied by volunteer musicians had recounted the merits, qualities and exploits of the deceased at great length and with emphasis before a numerous audience which remained attentive and never grew tired. They boasted of his good deeds, listed his particular habits and tastes and enumerated his many children and grandchildren.

They dwelled with great satisfaction on the intimacies which he had taken with the fair sex up to quite an advanced age, and in support of their remarks showed brightly illuminated drawings painted on long streamers of glazed calico. These drawings, as much by the truth of the attitudes shown as by their outrageous realism, were the joy of the spectators. Both children and adults roared with laughter as they listened to the highly spicy commentary of the improvisers.

A curious fact was that this exhibition did not occasion any obscene or even suggestive gesture on the part of the audience.

The bonzes, who are the only art students in this country, are the ones who color these pictures. If published in our own land, the latter would certainly call down all the rigor of the law on their author.

The day of cremation finally came, and the funeral proper began.

One of the sons of the deceased first set free two pairs of partridges and turtledoves, pet birds which he had had. The poor creatures were unaccustomed to flight and refused to leave their cage, but then beat their wings and clumsily escaped to a perch a few meters above ground on one of the trees [207] in the garden. A trail of ashes was spread all around the fence surrounding the house of the deceased in order, as popular belief has it, to prevent his spirit from escaping into the nearby region and tormenting the living.

A solid bamboo stretcher which twelve hardy men would carry on their shoulders was placed on the ground to await the catafalque. Attendance was heavy, and people of all ages came from a distance. They wore their holiday clothes with vivid, light and iridescent colors. They wore flowers in their ears and hair and carried multi-colored streamers, wax candles and sticks of incense in their hands.

The members of the family, the officials of the Muong and the bonzes were also there in force.

The catafalque was carried from the house by hand and put down on the stretcher, which the porters then raised to their shoulders. At its base, near the feet of the deceased, was fastened a strip of calico

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satisfaction and finds a pleasant test of his abilities in setting words to refrains whose meaning is unknown and in stimulating laughter or pleasant and amusing ideas in his audience, either by vaunting the joys of love and the plastic perfections of the human body, or by recalling [217] useful or pleasant memories, or by honoring justice and goodness. The morals of these folk, who are indolent because they are content with very little and are happy and healthy, and to whom all our subtleties are unknown, permit the greatest license in songs and improvisations and the greatest realism and crudity in the expression of thoughts.

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In spite of this, there is not the least unhealthy intention in either the poet or his audience. As we have seen above in connection with burials, children of both sexes attend all these festivities accompanied by their parents. They all take pleasure in the same refrains and laugh at the same funny sayings, not because they are vicious but because they are pure pagans for whom enjoyment and pleasure are like gods. The songs are animated by graceful gestures and together with the music form a whole which is poetic according to their particular esthetic canons and which is simply a manifestation of art and not an indication of loose morals.

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Theater. The Laotians also have a dramatic repertory consisting of longwinded plays, epics, religious and warlike stories, romantic tales, ancient legends, etc. These poems are played by several actors, with an orchestra and supernumeraries, and require many very ornate costumes which have not varied in form since the earliest times. Usually, however, the costumes are mere tinsel.

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Like the Cambodian and Siamese theater from which it comes, the Laotian theater interprets age-old works taken from the Védas, the Ramayana or the Mahabharata. To this repertory are added purely Kmer plays and various adaptations of Burmese origin which are performed in the classical costumes and in which a strong tinge of comedy and modernism and a bit of satire are mingled with the ancient traditions.

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Women are excluded from the theater, and the female roles are played by young men. As in the case of songs and improvisations, dramatic knowledge, the repertory of plays and the art of acting are handed down from father to son. The actors are called Lakhone and plays are called Kam-Kong-Lakhone or Kam-Kong [218] Fone-Lakhone. If they include dances or ballets. Finally, one last dramatic genre

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inside is lacquered red.

The pirogues are manned by forty or fifty oarsmen who half
[225] [Illustration] [226] [Blank page] [227] crouch and half sit in
pairs on what amount to thwarts made of bamboo and joined to a
framework. The oarsmen face forward as they paddle, holding their
blade in both hands and not supporting it on any point of the boat.
A pirogue chief, usually a mandarin, is in the prow, and in the stern
is the pilot, who jumps about and stimulates the whole crew with his
shouts and gestures. Amidships there are sometimes musicians, with
kene, gong and tom-tom, and two or three trained men who, their
belts [Illustration here] adorned with enormous jointed "lingams,"
dance the "Phallic" standing up with their feet on the edges of the
pirogue and declaim occasional odes and improvisations the terms of
which are extremely crude.(1). In their songs they invite beings,

(1) In southern Laos the men who perform these dances hold
grotesque masks in front of their faces with their hands.

plants and elements to unite, combine and fertilize one another so
as to maintain "Life" in all its forms on the surface of the earth.

The crews of the different racing pirogues are clothed in different
colors, like the jackets of our jockeys, and they vie ardently with one
another, making the water fly to surpass their own efforts. The crew
which reaches the finish line first manifests its enthusiasm by [228]
standing up in the pirogue, uttering shouts of triumph and brandishing
the oars. Oftentimes all these uncoordinated movements result in
throwing everybody into the water, but the pirogue is soon righted
and emptied to the accompaniment of roars of laughter and the crew
members take up their posts again, ready for a new race.

Racing pirogues are not launched until the time when they are
to be used. Ordinarily they are stored on sawhorses and under sheds
on the grounds of certain pagodas whose bonzes are responsible for
their upkeep, and for storing the oars and accessories and clothing
of the oarsmen.

Certain pirogues are held in common by the inhabitants of a
village, while others are the property of particular rich men, muong
chiefs or high mandarins who have had them built at their own
expense and pay for their upkeep and for that of their crew of oars-
men. In Laos a man will become the owner of a racing pirogue as
in France one might become the owner of a racing stable. The racehorse

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796 It is not necessary to delay here over the licentious scenes, the songs
 ● 831 with words defying decency, the action of special marionettes, all
 789 the allusions to the relationship between men and women intended to
 stimulate the fertility of the earth by sympathetic magic, all of which
 are well-known rites from classic antiquity up to ancient China. We
 will refer the reader to the authoritative study on the cycle of The
 Golden Bough by Sir James Frazer.

796 But what is the exact origin of this feast? Some claim that it
 is peculiar to Vientiane and has been celebrated in other towns of
 Laos only within the last twenty years. This comment is of capital
 interest. For, after the pillaging of Vientiane in 1827 by the Siamese
 General Phya Bodin, the majority of the population of Vientiane was
 deported to the right bank of the Mekong. Gradually the town was
 re-peopled by people coming from Tran-Ninh. Now it is a curious
 fact that on all the rocket shafts there is a strange decorative design which
 is similar to those seen on bracelets and necklaces in the region of
 Xieng Khouang. Some [40] reliable authors having put out the hypo-
 thesis that the designs on these necklaces were the survival of an ancient
 solar cult, should one conclude that the rockets are the last misunder-
 stood vestiges of an ancient fire worship, formerly practised by the
 populations of Tran Ninh? But then, at what time and under the in-
 fluence of what rite, did this fire worship become transformed into a
 ceremony to obtain rain? The question remains open and perhaps
 future research and discoveries will give an explanation of this feast
 which is one of the most original and least known of Laos.

The Sacrifice of the Buffalo.

796 The sacrifice of the buffalo takes place at about the same time
 782 as the feast of the rockets. This ceremony is known to all the Indo-
 nesian people of southeastern Asia, and its survival in Laos is of the
 greatest interest in the study of the antecedents of this country.

This ceremony is spread out through the months of May and June
 when the rainy season begins. It is found in western Laos where, ac-
 cording to a Pali chronicle, a Laotian king of Xieng Mai, who had
 no faith, adored demons and sacrificed buffaloes to the genii of the
 woods, the trees, the mountains, etc....

At Vientiane, near the Jules Bosc Avenue, can be seen a large
 stone which the Laotians worship as being a grain of rice. The buffalo
 is killed near this stone. A Nang Thyein woman, "inspired or possessed,
 after a series of invocations and ritual dances, pours water from a
 teapot onto the stone, while the by-standers flood the same stone with